

Imām Aḥmad's 'Aqīda and Pseudo-Ḥanbalī 'Aqīda

by GF Haddad – Qasyoun@ziplip.com – Sha'bān 1423

The Shāfi'ī *faqīh*, Shaykh al-Islām al-Haytamī was asked: “Was the belief of Imām Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal the same as [certain] present-day Ḥanbalīs claim?” He replied:

Concerning the doctrine of the Imām of *Ahl al-Sunna*, Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal ؑ – may Allāh ﷻ grant him the loftiest of gardens as his resting-place and destination, bestow upon us and him His bounties, and grant him a dwelling in the loftiest *firdaws*: his doctrine was in absolute conformity with the belief of *Ahl al-Sunna*, and completely concordant. It included the belief that Allāh ﷻ is exalted beyond those matters that the oppressors and dissenters attribute to Him. That is, Allāh ﷻ is exalted from possessing direction, parts, corporeality, and so forth among the various Attributes of imperfection.

The truth of the matter is that Allāh is free from all the Attributes that are not characterized by absolute perfection; and all those things that are being circulated and publicized among the ignoramus as being said by this great *mujtahid* Imām are a slander. It is an outright lie that this Imām ever claimed direction or the like in describing the Attributes of Allāh ﷻ. May Allāh lead to perdition those who attribute such positions to the Imām who is entirely exonerated of having said such things.

All these matters have been explained by the ḥadīth Master, Imām Abū al-Faraj Ibn al-Jawzī, who belongs to his [Imām Aḥmad's] school. He has cleared the Imām's name of such foul slanders and has provided explicit proofs exposing the lies of the slanderers.

And beware of what Ibn Taymiyya, his student Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya and others wrote; he [Ibn Taymiyya] is a man who took his lusts for his Lord, for which Allāh led him astray despite his learning, sealed upon his hearing and heart, and put a veil upon his sight; and who can guide him after Allāh let him be misguided? Why should He not, when these heretics have gone past the boundaries set by the *Sharī'a* and trampled them? Yet they imagine that they are the guided ones, that they are guided by their Lord Almighty when the truth is that they are not. Rather, they are on the wrong path, the most heinous, misleading way and most abominable traits. They are afflicted by vices and have incurred a great loss. May Allāh humble their followers and wipe the earth clean from their likes!¹

A contemporary example of this difference

A contemporary example of the disparity between Ḥanbalī 'aqīda and puristic Taymiyyan views is the recent edition of the Ḥanbalī Shaykh al-Islām, the Imām and *Musnid* Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn Badr al-Dīn ibn Balbān al-Dimashqī al-Ṣāliḥī's (1006-1083) compendium of *fiqh*, *adab* and 'aqīda titled *Mukhtaṣar al-Ifādāt fī Rub' al-'Ibādāt wal-Ādāb wal-Ziyādāt* by a “Salafī” student and his teacher Muḥammad Sulaymān al-Ashqar who injected into the work the following aberrations:²

Ibn Balbān's text	“Salafī” footnote	Rebuttal
Conclusion: On knowledge of Allāh ﷻ and what pertains thereto and what the legally qualified person must believe [p. 485]	The author was not blessed with success – Allāh forgive him! – in reporting the 'Aqīda of the <i>Salaf</i> that Imām Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal and the expert authorities of the <i>Madhhab</i> held.	Ibn Balbān – Allāh reward him! – shows mastery of the 'Aqīda of the Sunni <i>Salaf</i> including Abū Ḥanīfa, Aḥmad, and al-Ash'arī with a view to confront innovations current in his time in and outside his own School, including <i>tajīm</i> and <i>i'tizāl</i> .
It is obligatory to categorically affirm (<i>al-jazm</i>) that He ﷻ is one, indivisible and not made of parts, single not in the sense of number... [p. 487]	Shaykh al-Islām [Aḥmad] Ibn Taymiyya warned against such newfangled terms and cites the very same terms used by the author as examples of what not to say.	Ibn Balbān echoes Ash'arī (Ibn Khafīf) and Mātūrīdī (<i>Fiqh al-Akbar</i>) 'aqīda while Ibn Taymiyya innovated triple- <i>tawhīd</i> terminology never used by Imām Aḥmad and claims that Aḥmad believed Allāh has a limit whereas it is established he held the opposite.

¹Al-Haytamī, *Fatāwā Ḥadīthiyya* (p. 203).

²Ibn Balbān, *Mukhtaṣar al-Ifādāt*, ed. Muḥammad Nāṣir al-'Ajmī (Beirut: Dār al-Bashā'ir al-Islāmiyya, 1998).

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It is obligatory to categorically affirm that He ﷻ is neither a substance (*jawhar*) nor a body (*jism*) nor an atom (*'arad*).

Contingencies never indwell Him (*lā tahalluhu al-hawādith*) nor does He indwell any of them, nor can any of them encompass Him.

So whoever believes or says that Allāh is, in His essence (*bi-dhātih*), in every place or in a place, is a *kāfir*. It is obligatory to categorically affirm that He ﷻ is **separate** (*bā'in*) from His creation. Allāh ﷻ was when there was no place then He created place and He is now as He was before He created place. [p. 489]

Whoever likens Him to anything in His creation has definitely committed *kuf'r*, for example, he who says "He is a body" or says "He is a body unlike bodies" (*jismun lā kal-ajsām*).

In any case, whatever occurs in the mind and dawns upon the imagination, such is other than the Owner of Generosity and Majesty. [p. 490]

The authentically transmitted Divine Names and Attributes must be accepted, believed, and conveyed just as they came even if the meaning cannot be conceived (*wa'in lam yu'qal ma'nāh*). [p. 491]

My ailment left me through the blessing of seeing [Imām Ahmad] in dream, Allāh be well-pleased with him! [p.493]

We ask Him ﷻ to make us firm upon Sunni 'Aqīda with the *baraka* of our Prophet, the Leader of creation. [p. 493]

The *Madhhab* of *Ahl al-Sunna* is the affirmation (*ithbāt*) of the Names and Attributes together with the negation of likeness (*tashbīh*) and organs (*adawāt*). [p. 494]

Know that everything other than Allāh and His Attributes is contingent and that He has created it, brought it into being, and originated it from nothing, by no prior cause (*'illa*) nor driving purpose (*gharad*)

Shaykh al-Islām IT said...: "the terms *jism*, *jawhar* and the like are neither in the Book of Allāh nor the Sunna of His Prophet, nor the words of any of the Companions and their pious Successors to the Day of Judgment [*sic*] and the rest of the Imāms of the Muslims, whether to affirm or deny."

Our shaykh Muhammad [Sulaymān] al-Ashqar said: "This is innovated speech that misses the mark, which no legal proof affirms nor denies therefore it can neither be confirmed nor denied. And even if it were confirmed it could suggest what is untrue, as it would if it were denied."

The denial of place is an imprecise term (*lafz mujmal*) [!] and innovated speech while Allāh ﷻ has said that He is established (*mustawin*) over His Throne above His heavens in absolute height (*fil-'uluw al-mutlaq*). So the words of the author – Allāh forgive him! – are novel in meaning as they are novel in wording.

"This is innovated speech that misses the mark, which no legal proof affirms nor denies therefore it can neither be confirmed nor denied. And even if it were confirmed it could suggest what is untrue, as it would if it were denied."

"The author did not broach the *tawhīd* of Godhead which is the root of the Religion but instead comes up with those newfangled expressions that are not found in the Book nor in the Sunna and are unknown by the *Salaf*."

"No, the meaning is known!"

It only left him through the Divine decree!

This is part of the forbidden and illicit *tawassul* as was assessed by IT.

"If he means by organs, such as Allāh ﷻ has affirmed for Himself of the two hands, the eye, and others of His lofty Attributes, then his words are incorrect because they contradict the text of the Qur'ān."

"This cannot be correct, Allāh ﷻ does what He wishes to Whom He wishes, the noble Qur'ān is full of the causality (*ta'tīl*) of His acts as in His saying, ﴿For that cause We decreed for the Children of Israel﴾ (5:32), ﴿for that He did create them﴾ (11:119);

Al-Ash'arī uses the very same terms in his *Risāla ilā Ahl al-Thughar*. Further, the term "uncreated" (*ghayr makhliq*) is not found in the Qur'ān, the Sunna or the language of the Companions and Successors yet Ahmad used it against those who affirmed the createdness of the Qur'ān.

This pedantic naysaying aims to justify the heresy of "pre-existent contingencies indwelling the Deity" (*hawādith lā awwala lahā hālla fī dhāt Allāh*) for which al-Ikhmaymī (d.764) suspected Ibn Taymiyya of Aristotelian freethinking (*dahriyya*) as does al-Būṭī in *al-Salafiyya* (p. 164-175).

The commentator defends *kuf'r* by crying *bid'a* while Ibn Balbān's words are reiterated verbatim by Sulaymān ibn 'Abd Allāh ibn Muḥammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb in his epistle on '*aqīda* titled *al-Tawdhī'an Tawhīd al-Khallāq fī Jawāb Ahl al-'Irāq* (1319/1901, p. 34, and Riyadh: Dār Taybah, 1984).

No comment is needed.

Ibn Balbān defined the creed of Oneness of Godhead at length in the very passage rejected by the commentator as unspeakable. The statement "whatever occurs in the mind" is established from Dhūl-Nūn ﷺ. Al-Shāfi'ī said something similar.

Mālik said of *istiwā'* "its 'how' is **inconceivable**" while al-Shāfi'ī said, "I believe in what came from Allāh in the **meaning meant** (*murād*) by Allāh and I believe in what came from the Messenger of Allāh in the **meaning meant by the Messenger** of Allāh ﷺ."

First, the *Jumhūr* said one may attribute effects to other than the Causator metaphorically. Second, the denial of causes and effects in the world of causes and effects is the doctrine of the fatalists (*Jabriyya*).

Imām Ahmad assessed that *Tawassul* through the Prophet ﷺ be part of every Muslim's *du'ā'* as admitted by IT himself.

Al-Taḥāwī said in his '*Aqīda* (§38): "He is beyond having limits placed on Him, or being bounded, or having parts or limbs or organs (*ta'ālā 'anil-hudūdī wal-ghāyātī wal-arkānī wal-a'dā'i wal-adawāt*)."

Al-Ashqar is unaware that *Ahl al-Sunna* never attribute cause to the Divine decrees and acts but wisdom (*hikma*) while the *Mu'tazila* cite the Qur'ān claiming that Allāh is driven by cause and that His acts are motivated by good.

nor motive (*dā'in*) nor need (*hāja*) nor necessity (*mūjib*), nor is consideration of any of the above incumbent upon Him whatsoever in His acts, yet He does nothing in vain. [p. 496]

He ﷻ is free to torture and punish creatures without prior offense nor subsequent recompense nor fitting regard. He can do what He likes and decree freely over them in any terms He wishes, yet all this is excellent (*hasan*) on His part because they are His dominion and He owns them and cannot be taken to account. Rather, they are taken to account. [p. 497]

and this talk is incoherent, his because the last of it ('in vain') contradicts the statement 'by no prior cause nor driving purpose.'"

"He ﷻ said: **«Your Lord wrongs no one»** (18:49) and injustice is evil and prohibited. How then could He possibly punish them without prior offense, yet this be *hasan*?"

Al-Māturīdī in *al-Tawhīd* (p. 215-216) ranks the attribution of '*illa* to the Divine acts among the aberrations of the *Mu'tazila* who pretexted that, otherwise, Allāh would be acting in vain. Ibn Khaffī: "He brings near Him whomever He will without [need for] cause and removes far from Him whomever He will without [need for] cause."

Al-Ashqar's objection is the *Mu'tazilī* doctrine in a nutshell as phrased by al-Jubbā'ī to al-Ash'arī after which the latter left them. Ibn Khaffī said: "Allāh is doer of what He will [**«Know you not that unto Allāh belongs the Sovereignty of the heavens and the earth? He punishes whom He will, and forgives whom He will. Allāh is Able to do all things»** (5:40)]:

Injustice is not attributed to Him, He rules over His dominion just as He will, without [anyone's entitlement to] objection whatsoever [**«Say : Who then can do aught against Allāh, if He had willed to destroy the Messiah son of Mary, and his mother and everyone on earth? To Allāh belongs the Sovereignty of the heavens and the earth and all that is between them. He creates what He will. And Allāh is Able to do all things»** (5:17); **«The sentence that comes from Me cannot be changed, and I am in no wise a tyrant unto the slaves»** (50:29)]." At the same time it is obligatorily known that Allāh does not take back His promise to reward those who believe and do good and punish evil-doers: **«But as for those who believe and do good works We shall bring them into gardens underneath which rivers flow, wherein they will abide for ever. It is a promise from Allāh in truth; and who can be more truthful than Allāh in utterance?»** (4:122). The scholars have described the former evidence as "based on reason" (*dalīl 'aqlī*) and the latter as "based on law" (*dalīl shar'ī*), noting that it is the latter which takes precedence over the former. Cf. al-Būṭī, *Kubrā al-Yaqīnāt* (p. 149).

And Allāh ﷻ knows best.